

Education Funding in Mississippi is Going Up, Not Down

By: Governor Haley Barbour

You may not know it, but some people say that if you favor giving our public schools a 4% increase in funding to serve the same number of students as last year, you are against public education. If this sounds a little confusing – join the club. According to some editorial writers, Mississippi schools are on the verge of total collapse because of education funding “cuts.” Actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

Education spending in Mississippi has risen nearly 50% in the last five years. Over the last ten years, Mississippi ranks 3rd in the nation in education funding increases. Mississippi’s average teacher salaries have gone from \$29,500 in 1999 to \$42,000 next year. Local school districts actually have almost \$250 million in their reserve accounts this year. And all of this while Mississippi is serving approximately the same number of K-12 students as we did when Ronald Reagan was President.

So with these increases, does that mean the recent budget debate at the Capitol is about cutting education? Absolutely not. The debate is solely over how big an increase education is going to get! The State Department of Education is asking for a 15% increase in funding over last year. My budget, and the House and Senate proposals, give increases to education but not as much as that request.

Education is the top funding priority in my budget. My budget fully funds next year’s teacher pay raise, doubles the funding for classroom supplies, funds textbooks for the first time in years and increases classroom funding by 8.3% and total education funding by 4% compared to this year.

Because it is rightly the top priority for state government, more than 62% of next year's budget will go to education; 50% of next year's budget will be spent on K-12 alone.

Yet, while education is Mississippi's top priority, it is not our only priority. Should Mississippi slash state spending for law enforcement, health care, parks and everything else so K-12 education can have 15% more in one year? While K-12 spending has risen nearly 50% with no increase in students, Mississippi universities and community colleges have seen their funding slashed over the last five years. State appropriations for our universities have gone down 9% over the last five years, while their enrollment grew 8%. Community colleges are receiving 14% less in state funds than five years ago, but they have 24% more students. And some in the Legislature have proposed huge, additional cuts for higher learning next year.

Some editorial writers like to point to Mississippi's rank in state education spending surveys but fail to take into account cost-of-living differences between our state and states like New York, for example. According to the National Education Association, Mississippi ranks 21st in the nation for education spending based on per capita income. Compared to neighboring states, Mississippi spends more per pupil than Alabama and Arkansas and less than Tennessee and Louisiana.

I am proud of what Mississippi has done in education spending, and I am even prouder that during the worst budget crisis in state history, state leaders are talking about more education funding, not less. What disappoints me are threats to fire teachers, increase class sizes or raise local taxes if certain funding demands are not met. All were threatened last year and none of them materialized. An education official was quoted recently as saying that "in the past, we cried wolf and the wolf never came..." Mississippi

parents need to know the facts about their schools and not be subjected to scare tactics.

I want Mississippi to continue its strong commitment to properly funding our public schools, but we need to have an open and honest dialogue about what that funding level should be and how we can use that funding to best educate Mississippi schoolchildren.

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